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**Art and Leadership**

**by**

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Art and leadership. Are there any connections? There has been very little research done on the relationship between art and leadership. However, it is about time that we become reflective practitioners and examine the context of art as a manifestation of leadership. Art and leadership are similar and primarily united along the lines of their ability to transcend time and use of the right brain hemisphere.

How does one know what is art or leadership? Has anyone been able to develop a sure-fire technique that enables them to know something is art or leadership when it is happening? In the book Art Through the Ages, the statement is made that the "whole domain of art constantly shifts in outline and population, as does our knowledge of it. Identification of a work of art may be accepted at one time, rejected at another" (Croix, Tansey & Kirkpatrick<sup>note</sup> 21). One prominent leadership scholar, comments that,

It is almost a ritual for the authors of books and articles on leadership to make two statements at the beginning of their works. The first statement goes like this: 'Many scholars have studied leaders and leadership over the years, but there is still no clear idea of what 'leadership' is or who leaders are' (Rost<sup>note</sup> 13).

Neither of these disciplines have developed definitions which explicitly describe what is included in each field of study. However, within each field many scholars have discussed the need to develop definitions so that scholars know what they are studying and practitioners know what they are doing (Rost 8).

Rost wrote a book in 1991, entitled Leadership for the Twenty-First Century, in which he highlighted the need for the creation of a definition within the area of leadership studies. He states that:

The second problem with leadership studies as an academic discipline and with the people who do leadership is that neither the scholars nor the practitioners have been able to define leadership with precision, accuracy, and conciseness so that people are able to label it correctly when they see it happening or when they engage in it. (Rost 6).

Although I can understand why Rost would like to see a universal definition developed for leadership studies, I do not agree that a singular definition is necessary to achieve a complete understanding of leadership. There are many instances in life where definitions exist, yet subtly change, and there are still other instances where definitions are never even established. In both situations, there is either no need for a singular definition to achieve an understanding of the subject at hand, or the definition is altered to fit the situation.

In reference to the ambiguity surrounding the definition of art,

Harold Reed wrote a book entitled, The Dynamics of Leadership, in which he stated the importance of attempting a definition of art so that his audience could have as clear and decisive an understanding as possible of the term. He stated that art may be defined as,

a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colors, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential-their one illuminating and convincing quality-the very truth of their existence (Reed, 1964, 103).

Reed's proposed definition of art is confusing, thereby supporting the idea that no definition is needed. What is the point of a definition, if people do not understand the meaning behind it?

Both art and leadership are examples of definitional discontinuity. Art, like leadership studies, is an overarching and encompassing domain of many different types of mediums and expressions. A definitive definition is lacking for what makes art "art" because it can mean many things for many different people. Putting a strict definition on what is art hinders any further expansion or expression within the realm of art. The same holds true in the case of narrowly defining what is leadership.

Another reason why I do not see the need to have a universal definition for either art or leadership studies is because scholars have

tackled these subjects for years without producing a definition, with success. I tend to think that a universal definition takes away some of the flexibility which inherently exists in each of these contexts. By requiring that an agreed upon definition be established for either art or leadership, the opportunity for people to think critically and decipher for themselves what leadership or art means to them, is taken away. The creation of a definition for these interdisciplinary fields takes away the power of the individual to critically analyze what is transpiring before them. The fact that devoted scholars have not been able to come up with definitions for leadership or art, could imply that there will never be a universal definition.

Other commonalities exist between leadership and the arts outside of the fact that they are both multidisciplinary fields and lack universal definitions. There is evidence that both fields struggle with answering the same type of question regarding the development and creation of leaders, that is, are artists born or made and are leaders born or made? Zolberg answers this question regarding artists with the suggestion that “Whatever the conception of the artist, whether an individualistic expert in emotions, virtuoso performer, role player in an instrumental microworld, or alienated pawn buffeted by broad structural forces, the artist is best understood as arising from and interacting with those forces” (Zolberg 111).

Gray and Pfeiffer argue the idea that leaders are born and not made

is a myth. They believe that this statement is reflective of the charismatic approach to leadership, and it is myth because a standard list of traits with which people were born could not be made. The researchers which they consulted suggest that leadership is less of a “trait” and more of a “state” because it is a process in which an individual emerges to meet a need (Gray & Pfeiffer 6).

Many scholars have pointed to the connection between artists and leaders and the arts and leadership through book and chapter titles. Very few go into why they desire to classify “management as a performing art” or “leadership as culture.” However, Reed discussed his belief that the leader is an artist:

an artist working in a medium which is at once complex and universal. His material is people. And just as the task of the artist is one of organization of ideas or materials if any work of art is to be achieved, so with leadership the bringing of human desire and energy into organized relations becomes a work of high artistry (Reed 106).

He goes into more detail suggesting that the following attributes are those which the leader should try to embody from the artist: technical deftness, new insight, devotion to a vision, and effort at communication (Reed 106).

Peter Vaill wrote a chapter in his book Managing as a Performing Art, which reflected on the lessons which the performing arts might have

to teach us and remind us about leading and managing. He suggests that “action taking” should be considered to be a performing art, as it pushes one to consider “what the rounded performance as a whole in fact is; that is, what the overall process of your managing activity is intended to be” (Vaill 116). He goes on to say that “If management is a performing art, the consciousness of the manager is transformed. One becomes much more interested in the quality of the process and much more aware of how a given course of action does or does not resemble other things that one has done or others have done” (Vaill 118). Vaill discussed how form matters within the performing arts and if leaders became as aware of the role of form, as the arts are, it would help “many a leader to anticipate the impact of various actions of the system, for if the leader is form conscious or not, the members of the system certainly are” (Vaill 119). Yet another lesson which leadership can learn from the performing arts is making sure that members derive some pleasure in the process since within the context of the performing arts, “play and enjoyment are integral to getting the job done” (Vaill 119).

There are three qualities found within the performing arts that are often overlooked in discussions of leadership. They are particularity, variety, and contextuality. Instead of looking at management as a science, which prevents people from assuming the uniqueness of the system, Vaill believes that the arts demonstrate a need to appreciate the utter uniqueness and concreteness of every event. By seeking enjoyment in



daily activities, the “essence of the particular” is raised, and there becomes less of a chance that “routine” will be accepted within the workplace (Vaill 120).

Looking at how the arts bring vastly varied parts together in productions in their conscious effort to “fit,” “blend,” “mesh,” and “harmonize” all of the elements, one is provided with evidence how “An organic unity of *feeling* can be developed which can bring a coherence and flow to what would otherwise be only a loosely related collection of parts” (Vaill 121). This reflects the concept of variety and it helps managers to see the need for each employee to understand the “essence” of the business, as they possess little or no power over the phenomena which are present within the workplace.

Finally, “contextuality (or chemistry),” “is really a matter of the culture of the system and this culture is something that develops over time and exists throughout a given field of endeavor rather than singly in one system” (Vaill 122). This helps to remind leaders that it is not possible to believe that various elements can be interchanged and moved around on a whim because of the sensitivity within the arts to the wide variety of reasons for why the “show should not go on” (Vaill 122). Neither of the systems present in the arts or in leadership are intrinsically resilient.

Vaill concludes his discussion of particularity, variety, contextuality, by saying that “what it means to manage a system of

contextuality interconnected actors who are also contextuality interconnected consciousnesses is one of the most complicated issues in the whole field of leadership and management” (Vaill 123).

Since the artist has the ability to transform culture, looking at the artist as a leader in society seems to be a very logical linkage. However, this association is not usually made because our society is accustomed “to the rational and gives great reverence to the thinker and the to the leaders in scientific discovery” (Reed 102). Since the artist deals with things which are more intangible, people have greater difficulty in acknowledging his or her impact on the culture of the day. Perhaps the association between artist and leader is not made because people outside of the artistic community do not fully realize the contributions which artist make to our society. A sense of appreciation of the arts and their impact on culture needs to be manifested within each and everyone of us before the artist can be envisioned as a leader. This brings us to realize the importance of arts in education. Bramwell, Scott & Millett propose that, “communication, creativity, and teamwork are essential to citizenship, leadership, business, and the success of any organization” (Bramwell, Scott and Millett B7). They go on to say that eliminating the teaching of arts in schools will “deny students effective educational vehicles for developing these skills” (Bramwell, Scott & Millett B7)

Roberta Hershenson writes about the need to,

Awaken in children a respect for their own creativity, and they will

grow intellectually by leaps and bounds. Show the connection between what is art and what is not by bringing artists into the classroom and turn schools into places of energy and excitement where every child can thrive (Hershenson 13WC).

We need to recognize that “creative leaders operate indirectly by fashioning some kind of symbolic object (a poem, an opera, a philosophical position) that affects future practice in a domain” (Gardner 16).

Let’s propose that leaders are measured by their total impact, that is: how many people are influenced, how much they are influenced, and how long they are influenced. Keeping this in mind one can see how the work of artists, writers, musicians, sculptors, and architects is preserved for many generations. Additionally, one can see how leaders transcend time, since great leaders are remembered for generations after they are gone. Art and leadership transcend time. According to Croix, Tansey, and Kirkpatrick,

The fact is that a visible and tangible work of art is a kind of *persisting event*. It was made at a particular time and place by particular persons, even if we do not always know just when, where, and by whom. Although it is the creation of the past, art continues to exist in the present, long surviving its times” (Croix, Tansey & Kirkpatrick 3).

These authors also ask us to consider, “By virtue of its survival, is not the work in a sense *independent* of time? May not a work of art speak to

people of all times as long as it survives?” (Croix, Tansey & Kirkpatrick 3). Reed classifies time as the most reliable art critic because it “continues to make clear that representations of what is REAL and what is PERFECT are the enduring attraction of art and the legitimate basis of the artist’s claim to leadership” (Reed 107).

Artists can also be considered to be leaders based on their ability to create works of art that stand the test of time. An article which was published in the Los Angeles Times, stated that, “Art is a transmitter of culture, the free expression and creative juice of the human spirit. It transcends the inhibiting walls of nation states and politics” (“In Defense of Arts” 15). Harold Reed makes the argument that the creative artist is a leader partially on the basis of the artist’s ability to transcend time. “The literary artist leaves an indelible mark upon society. Likewise, the painter, the sculptor, the architect, and the musician all deeply influence the culture of their time and across the centuries” (Reed 103). Reed suggests in his creative artist theory that true leaders need to give attention to the idea of “biosociative” thinking, which he defines as the “act of creation,” a “creative leap,” an “intuitive flash,” or a “spontaneous flash of insight, which shows a familiar situation or event in a new light” (Reed 104). He believes that experiencing reality on several planes at once places leaders on a higher level of understanding, thereby preparing them for new and important breakthroughs. In The Tao of Leadership, it is mentioned that a leader should, “Use intuition and

reflection rather than trying to figure things out” because “The more you can let go of trying, and the more open you become, the more easily you will know what is happening” (Heider 27).

Reed’s theory was based on the concept of transcendence in conjunction with the idea of creativity, a function of the right-brain. Other scholars have discussed the importance of operating on instinct to prevent the pull between the left-brain habits of leaders and their right-brain visions (Bennis 103). This is not an attribute commonly associated with leadership because our society values the rational and left-brain way of thinking. Warren Bennis’s book On Becoming a Leader, devotes an entire chapter to discussing the importance of integrating the two sides of the brain together to work in complimentary ways. It is important to note that, he places emphasis on the right-brain’s process of conceptualization because it is not readily acknowledged in our culture. In fact, people typically believe that, “Habits are born in the left brain and unmade in the right” (Bennis 103). Bennis says, “A part of whole-brain thinking includes learning to trust what Emerson called the ‘blessed impulse,’ the hunch, the vision that shows you in a flash the absolutely right thing to do. Everyone has these visions; leaders learn to trust them” (Bennis 104). Norman Lear, a producer, screenwriter, and director, co-founder of People for the American Way, is one of those leaders who has learned to rely on his instincts and he says that “When I’ve been most effective, I’ve followed that impulse” (Bennis 105). Bennis, like Reed,

seems to believe that “Following the ‘blessed impulse’ is...basic to leadership. This is how guiding visions are made real” (Bennis 105).

Parallels also seem to exist between these two disciplines along the line of transformational leadership. Joseph Epstein says that artists, “change the way we intuit and understand and feel about the world around us. They truly alter sensibility” (Epstein 25) T. S. Eliot saw the role of the artist as:

the only genuine and profound revolutionist, in the following sense. The world always has, and always will, tend to substitute appearance for reality. The artist, being always alone, being heterodox, when everyone is orthodox, is the perpetual upsetter of conventional values, the restorer of the real...His function is to bring back humanity to the real (Epstein 26).

Both of these statements are highly reflective of what leadership scholars have termed transformational leadership. Daft says that transformational leaders, “are distinguished by the ability to bring about change, innovation, and entrepreneurship” (Daft 468). Burns’ theory of transforming leadership describes it as a “process in which leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation” (Yukl 210). This is deeply indicative of the purpose of art as defined by Paul Goldberger, cultural-news editor of the “New York Times,” “what art strives to do...is not to coddle but to challenge” (Epstein 28). Alan Gowans in his book On Parallels in Universal History stated that one of the

functions of art in society is conviction and persuasion, that is, “making tangible symbols and visual metaphors of ideas and beliefs which a given society collectively holds, or, it is felt, ought to hold” (Mann 10).

Calis and Smircich discussed the transforming capacities of one art, the narrative, in their article, *Reading Leadership as a Form of Cultural Analysis*.” They say that we have

undervalued the skills of narration in favor of technical skills. A great story speaks to hearts and souls in a way that science does not. Narration frees us to have a different relationship with organizational life. Through narrative we can build a social bond on the basis of insight and imagination and inspiration (Calis and Smircich 226).

Howard Gardner suggests that the most essential feature of effective leadership is, “the capacity of a leader to create a story that affects the thoughts, feelings, and/or actions of other individuals” (Gardner 16). In all of these aforementioned cases, artists and leaders are elevating their audiences to become better selves; they are actively involved in transforming culture.

Creativity is one of the key elements in leadership and artistry. Eliot Hutchinson believes that the process of creativity occurs in four main steps: preparation, frustration, insight, and verification (Reed 105). Reed also points out that creativity is linked to freedom and imagination.

Creative leaders must have this extraordinary sensitivity to their

surroundings and the ability to see things to which the average person is blind. To combine the images of past sensations into fresh groups for purposes of their own, to use these images to symbolize abstract ideas, this is the power of imagination at work (Reed 106).

He concludes his argument with the following statement, "Creative leadership envisions opportunities and moves ahead to capture the moment, mold it, and make it great" (Reed 107). Once again one can see the connection between the artist and his right-brain method of thinking and creativity and the "blessed impulse." Bennis believed that Sydney Pollack described right-brain leadership best, when he said that it comes out of

a certain kind of controlled free association. All art comes out of that. We say daydreams, we say inspiration, but scientifically what it is, is free association. It's the ability to be in touch with that. That's where you get the ideas. And then it's the ability to trust the ideas once you have them, even though you may break certain rules. And then it's the confidence and courage to carry out the ideas once you've found them and you've trusted them. Then you can't be afraid to fail. Otherwise it's just imitative (Bennis 108).

Our society may also not value the artist as leader due to the fact that his impact is not direct and his constituency is ambiguous, as one does not know who has been affected by his or her creation. An article published in The Independent, discussed how creative leaders often spend



their time in isolation. Therefore one can see how the concept of followership in the context of art can be very different from the situations that most contexts present. Traditionally, one thinks of a leader having an impact on his or her followers, such as in the case of transformational leadership. In that example, the leader directly empowers the follower to higher levels of motivation and art. Perhaps society does not typically think of artists as leaders because their constituency is not directly led by them. Instead, the artists using their own freedom and imagination create a work of art so that the followers can take away from it what they wish based on their own systems of freedom and imagination. The concept of followership as we presently consider it, is skewed in the context of the arts.

It should now seem quite apparent how the arts and leadership are connected. Both are multi-faceted fields which lack universal definitions. They pose similar questions to the scholars and practitioners within their respective disciplines. They feed off of one another as students of one discipline can learn many things from students of the other, such as particularity, variety, and contextuality. Both transform individuals and entire cultures through their ability to transcend time. Finally, both rely heavily on the use of the right-brain for their creative endeavors in order to gain and empower followers. These are just a few of the ways in which leadership and the arts are united. By becoming reflective practitioners, we will undoubtedly unearth many other similarities as well.

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